

# The Ascension of Mount Coatepetl by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huitznahua: A Temple Made of Words

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**Abstract:** Mount Coatepetl, the holy mountain of the Mexica, and the mythical plot that refers the birth of their main god Huitzilopochtli, have been carved in stone and reproduced in the architectonic features of the Templo Mayor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. One of the oral versions of the myth, transcribed in Sahagún's *Historia General* (Codex Florentino, book III, chapter 1) which could have been the narrative basis for the edification of the temple, constitutes also a temple, a temple made of words and phrases, of sounds and rhythms. Beyond the semantic content of what is said, the formal structure of the text helps to visualize the temple by shaping with words what has been made in stone and remind the different stages in the gestation of the god, stages that define relevant aspects of the architecture of the temple.

Through a structural analysis of the Nahuatl text, we will show how the image of the temple is 'stamped' in the verbal account of the birth of Huitzilopochtli, or how the structure of the text shapes the architecture of the temple. We will consider, in very general terms, the relation between words and pictures in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl culture.

**Keywords:** architecture; formal structure; Nahuatl; Mexica; Huitzilopochtli; Coatepetl; Templo Mayor; Mexico-Tenochtitlan; pre-Hispanic period.

**Resumen:** El monte Coatepetl, la montaña sagrada de los mexica, y la trama mítica que narra el nacimiento de su dios tutelar: Huitzilopochtli, han sido tallados en la piedra y reproducidos en la configuración arquitectónica del Templo Mayor de México-Tenochtitlan. Una de las versiones orales del mito, transcrita en la *Historia General* de Sahagún (Códice Florentino, libro III, capítulo 1) que bien podría haber sido el fundamento narrativo para la edificación del templo, constituye también un templo, un templo hecho de palabras y frases, de sonidos y ritmos. Más allá de los contenidos semánticos de lo que se dice, la estructura formal del texto ayuda a visualizar el templo, formaliza con palabras lo que fue tallado en la piedra y recuerda las etapas de la gestación del dios, las cuales definen aspectos relevantes de la arquitectura del templo.

Mediante el análisis estructural del texto náhuatl, mostraremos cómo la imagen del templo está 'estampada' en el relato verbal del nacimiento de Huitzilopochtli, o cómo la estructura del texto configura la arquitectura del templo. Consideraremos primero, en términos muy generales, la relación entre la palabra y la imagen en la cultura náhuatl prehispánica.

**Palabras clave:** arquitectura; estructura formal; náhuatl; mexica; Huitzilopochtli; Coatepetl; Templo Mayor; México-Tenochtitlan; periodo prehispánico.

The foundation of Mexico-Tenochtitlan is the apotheotic culmination of a long nomadic wandering that began, according to verbal and pictographic accounts, in a mythical place of origin: Aztlan, situated also mythically as well as historically in the North (*Mictlampa*), in a vast and arid region referred as *Teotlalpan* 'the holy land'.<sup>1</sup> The journey terminated in the lacustre valley of Anahuac, in the precise place where a prickled pear cactus (*tunal*) portentously grew from a seed which was nothing but the sacrificed heart of Copil, the son of the moon<sup>2</sup> and on which an eagle descended to make its nest.

History and myth converge in what became retrospectively an initiatic and cyclic itinerary from an originary island to a 'promised land', surrounded by water, where a temple, *axis mundi* of a new world, was going to be edified.

The different places where the Aztecs stayed, on their way from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan, had a mythical, geographic or geopolitical importance in what has been called a 'pilgrimage'. They all constitute 'stages' in a formative process. Some places, however, acquired a specific function in this process. Such is the case of Mount Coatepetl, situated by most of the sources near Tula (Tollan), the city of the Toltecs.

According to the myth, Mount Coatepetl is the place where Huitzilopochtli, the main god of the Aztecs, was born thus becoming a neuralgic place for the Aztecs. This mountain, mythically situated somewhere between Aztlan and Tenochtitlan was to be virtually brought to the very heart of the Aztec ceremonial center, in architectural terms, becoming the Great Temple but it was mentioned also in the texts that refer the birth of the god.

Many oral sources, transcribed after the Conquest, or pictorial stories kept in codices relate the mythical vicissitudes of Huitzilopochtli's birth. One of the most important texts is probably the Nahuatl version contained in Sahagún's *Historia General* (Sahagún 1979, book III, chapter 1). This version constitutes a temple made of words and phrases which transforms Huitzilopochtli's deeds in an architectonic mental image.

Mount Coatepetl, the place referred in the myth, is also the oral text which had to be interiorized not to say 'somatized' by the members of the community in order to feel (more than to know) all the sequences leading to the birth of their god. Beyond the semantic content of what is said, the formal structure of the text would help to perform such an interiorization by shaping with words what had been built in stone: The Great Temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and remind the different stages in the gestation of the god.

Through a structural analysis of the Nahuatl text, we will show how the image of the temple is 'stamped' in the verbal account of the birth of Huitzilopochtli, or how the structure of the text shapes the architecture of the temple. We will first consider, in very general terms, the relation between words and pictures in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl culture.

1 *Teotlalpan* 'the holy land'; *Mictlampa* 'the North', literally 'toward the place of the dead'.

2 Alvarado Tezozómoc 1992): 43.

### Orality and pictography

Beside the metaphors, metonymies and all the stylistic effects produced by the oral text, which can be classified as ‘images’, the pictographic writing has probably helped to place the image as the ‘measure of all things’ in the nahuatl cognitive apprehension of the world. As a matter of fact, orality and pictographic writing had a complementary relation before the Conquest even though the semiology of picture was not subordinated to words as the alphabet is. The image could be ‘read’, and its contents verbally expressed, but it also produced meaning through lines, colours, position, size, and a compositive syntax which was illegible in verbal terms but visually significant.

After the Conquest, the painters, *tlahcuiloqueh*, were influenced by the presence of what we might call the ‘alphabetic spirit’ and we observe a change in the semiology of pictorial texts, with a recrudescence of phonetic glyphs. We can schematize this as follows:

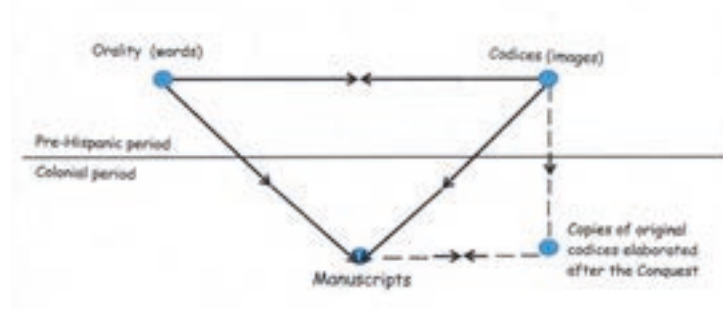


Figure 1. The word, the image and the alphabet.

The text we will analyse ‘lies’ in a manuscript and has lost a substantial part of its oral expression in the alphabetical version of the *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* or Codex Florentino (Sahagún 1540-1585)(Figure 2). The verbal core of the myth, however, seems to have accurately been transcribed and makes possible a structural analysis.

On the other hand, oral and pictographic versions of the myth coexisted, before the Conquest, generating a mutual influence of pictures on words and vice versa in both oral and pictorial texts. We will adduce the pictographic version of the birth of Huitzilopochtli contained in the Codex Boturini in order to situate what occurred on Mount Coatepetl in the mythical context of the *Peregrinación*, to show the metaphorical significance of pictures and how the temple could have been sketched through a compositive syntax.



Figure 2. The alphabetic version of the myth in the Codex Florentino (Sahagún 1540-1585: Book 3, fol. 3v).

### A mythographic version of Huitzilopochtli's birth

There are many oral and pictographic versions of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. The Codex Boturini provides one which permits to appreciate the semiological difference between the anecdotic legibility of the pictorial text and its illegible but highly significant mythographic composition (Figure 3).

### The anecdotic reading

#### Plate I (a)

The Aztecs were living on an island called Aztlán and were periodically going to a cave (*oztotl*), situated in Mount Colhuacan, to offer *acxoyatl* branches to their god. In the year 1-Flint, they definitely departed, and went to Colhuacan.

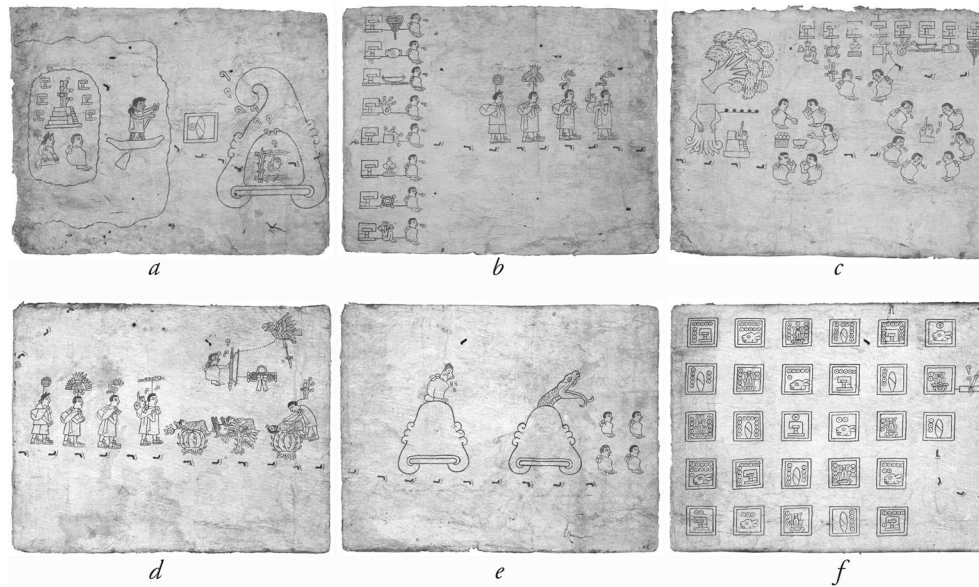


Figure 3. The pictorial sequence in the Codex Boturini (2015).

#### Plate II (b)

From Colhuacan, the same year, they began their migration towards the mythical place of their future sedentarization. In Colhuacan, with the Aztecs, lived seven other tribes: the Huexotzincas, the Chalcas, the Xochimilcas, the Malinalcas, the Chichimecas (or Tlahuicas), the Tepanecas and the Matlatzincas. The Aztecs carried Huitzilopochtli's image (or bones) in a *tlaquimilolli*, a sacred bundle. Those who carried the god were: Tezacacoatl, Cuauhcoatl, Apanecatli and Chimalma(n). They are situated in the middle of the plate, on an horizontal axis of progression.

#### Plate III (c)

The migrants arrived to a place called Cuahuatl Itzintla ('at the foot of the tree'), built their earth temple and put their god Huitzilopochtli on the top of it. They were about to eat when the huge tree, which was providing a shadow for them, suddenly broke. Huitzilopochtli addressed his people (the Aztecs) and told them they had to separate from the other tribes and go on their own. The tribes were sad. The Aztecs remained a long time at the foot the tree.

## Plate iv (d)

The Aztecs went on, and somewhere in *Teotlalpan* ‘the sacred land’ (the holy plains of the north, *Mictlampa*), the selenic Mimixcoa portentously appeared on their way. Their names are Xiuhnel, Mimich and Teoxahualli. Huitzilopochtli told the Aztecs that these Mimixcoa would be their first sacrificial victims, and that from now on their name wouldn’t be Aztecs anymore but Mexica. The image shows the Mimixcoa being sacrificed.

## Plate v (e)

The Mexica then went to Cuexteca Ichocayan and Coatl Ycamac. According to the corresponding text of Codex Aubin, during their stay in Coatl Ycamac, the fire drill ‘fell’ on Mount Coatepetl (Figure 4).

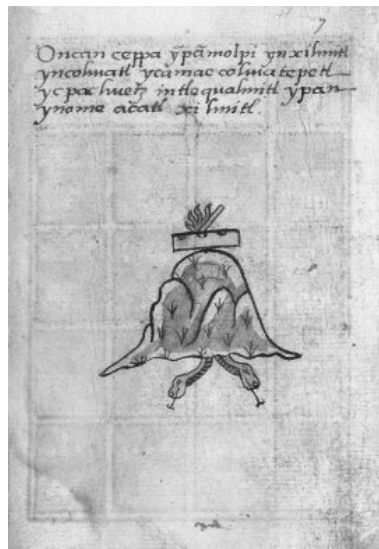


Figure 4. The fire drill fell on Mount Coatepetl, Codex Aubin (1576: fol. 7r).

## Plate vi

The sixth plate shows the number of years corresponding to the first five plates and the date the fire drill ‘fell’ on Mount Coatepetl: 2-Acatl ‘2-Reed’, indeed the first ‘New Fire’ since the departure from Aztlan.



### A mythographic reading of the pictorial text

Beyond the legible pictorial account we briefly related, a syntax of symbolic paradigms ‘produces’ the gestation and birth of Huitzilopochtli and outlines the temple. We will simply enumerate some of these paradigms:<sup>3</sup>

- The insularity and whiteness of Aztlan, the crossing of water, the presence of the god in a cave (*oztotl*).<sup>4</sup>
- The cave in the womb of the mountain (Colhuacan) and the spiral at its peak (Plate I).
- The perfect orthogonality of the eight tribes and the four bearers of the god (*teomamaqueh*), who are visually pulling the tribes in the vacuous no man’s land of *Teotlalpan* (Plate II).
- The rupture of the tree and the separation of the Aztecs from the other tribes (Plate III).
- The encounter of the four heliac Aztec *teomamaqueh* with the three selenic Mimixcoa. The sacrifice of the two men: Xiuhnel and Mimich, and of the woman, their elder sister Teoxahualli, the exact equivalent of Coyolxauhqui in the mythical context we will analyse.
- According to Codex Aubin, the new name and the new status of the Aztecs, now called Mexico, are a result of the narrative pictorial construction (Figure 5). The birth of Huitzilopochtli coincides with the vision of what will be his temple. In plate IV of Codex Boturini the composition is providing that vision: The birth of Huitzilopochtli, not pictorially referred but apprehensible in the squared configuration of the bearers of the god, the absences of the woman, of the god, of the sacred bundle, and the descent of the fire drill (*xiuhcoatl*), ‘the serpent of fire’ (Plates V and VI).

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see Johansson 2004a: 150-152

<sup>4</sup> In náhuatl *oztotl* is ‘cave’; *otztic* means ‘pregnant’.

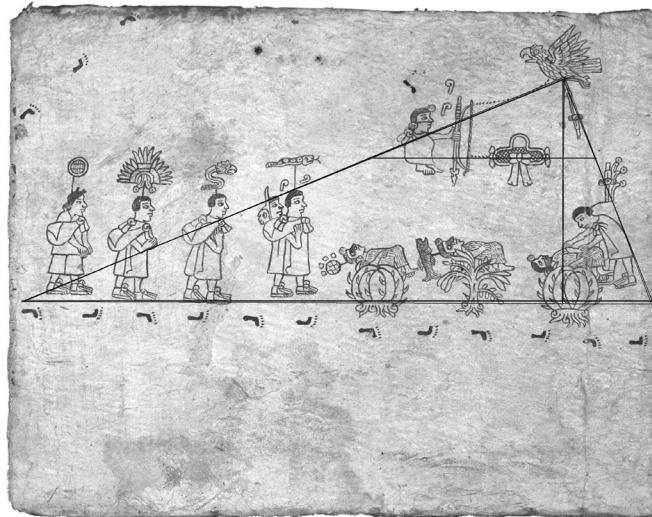


Figure 5. The temple outlined, Codex Boturini (2015).

### The image in a verbal text

The verbal production of meaning is mainly realized through language, that is to say words, a grammatical syntax of linguistic units, phrases and narrative mechanisms with a mythological or simply descriptive function. In most of Nahuatl oral accounts, however, the words seem to be weaved on a linguistic canvas or to be painted with colorful verbal strokes so that what they refer could be ‘seen’, could be felt, more than understood.

According to cognitive features inherent to Nahuatl culture, what is to be known has to be felt.<sup>5</sup> What is verbally communicated should reach one’s heart to be fully apprehended. The expression *teyollo ipan yauh in tlahtolli* ‘the speech (or the word) goes to one’s heart’<sup>6</sup> clearly manifests this fact. Let’s just mention, as an example, the visual apprehension of the departure from Iztapalapa of the Spanish troops, described by a Native witness whose oral relation was later transcribed by Sahagún in his *Historia*....

*Auh njman ie ic oalolinj in ie ic oalcalaqujzque njcan Mexico; njman ie ic mocecencaoa, moiauchichioa; moolpia, vel qujilpia in iniautlatquj; njman ie iehoantin in in cavallos: njman ie ic motetecpana, mocuecuetilia, movivipana, mocecepantilia.*

*Auh nauhteme in cavallos in iacattivitze, in attovitze, in teiacantivitze, in teiacaconotivitze, in te in teiacana; mocuecueptivi, ommocuecueptivi, onteixnamjctivi, havic tlachixtivi,*

<sup>5</sup> (*Tla*)*mati* in nahuatl means ‘to know’ as well as ‘to feel’.

<sup>6</sup> Sahagún 1979, book iv, chapter 32; Johansson 2004b: 221.



*nanacaztlachixtivitze, noviampa onjztivi in cacaltzalan, tlaixtotocativitze, onacotlachixtivi in tlapanco.*<sup>7</sup>

And thereupon they moved forth in order already to enter here into Mexico; thereupon they attired themselves, they arrayed themselves for war. They girt themselves; they bound on well their battle dress. Then their horses: thereupon they were, each one, disposed, arranged in rows, placed in order, put in line.

And four horse[men] came ahead; they came first, they came leading the others, they came constituting the vanguard of the others; they led the others. They went continually turning about; they went turning about repeatedly. They went facing the people. They went looking hither and thither; they came scanning every side, they went looking everywhere among the groups of houses, they came examining things. They went looking up at the roof terraces.<sup>8</sup>

The text, with the rhythmical repetition of words, synonyms, is painting the scene more than describing it.

In the text we analyze in this article, the narrative sequence corresponding to the climbing of Mount Coatepetl and Huitzilopochtli's birth is outlining with words the architecture of the temple, a temple verbally sketched and then interiorized by the community during a ritual performance.

### The notion of 'temple'

As we all know, in ancient Rome the temple (*templum*) was the imaginary square the *augur* was tracing with his stick in the sky. He remained seated during hours, observing what might occur in the space he had circumscribed and which became a sacred space: a temple, as well as all that was contained or occurring within that space.

When we mention the temple, we usually think of something 'built': A shrine, a church, whatever might be the shape of the edification. However the space-time of a dance is also a temple, as well as the ritual itself. An altered level of conscience produced by the consumption of hallucinogens is also a temple. A pictorial book and what it contains is a temple. The oral enunciation of a myth is a temple.

In Mesoamerica nature was a vast temple and each one of its geophysical manifestations a shrine. The deities and the places they inhabited seem to have converged in one notion. In the Yucatec Maya language, for example, *k'u* means both 'temple' and 'god'. The Nahuatl words for 'temple': *teocalli*, literally 'the house of the god', or *teopan* 'the place of the god' also suggest a fusion between what might have been a divinity and the space-time she or he occupied.

The Great Temple (*Templo Mayor*) of Mexico-Tenochtitlan was a huge and magnificent building, according to testimonies of the Spanish conquerors who could see it in 1519. It was the *axis mundi* of the Aztec community and the stone representation of

<sup>7</sup> Sahagún 1979, book XII, chapter 15.

<sup>8</sup> Translation: Sahagún 1970-1981, book XII, chapter 15: 39.

the idea they had of the world and of the mythical deeds corresponding to the birth of Huitzilopochtli at Mount Coatepetl. As it is well known, the Great Temple is the image of Mount Coatepetl, and its architectonic features were not only related to the cosmology of the Mexicas but more precisely to the mythical tribulations of his gestation in his mother's earthy womb, the antagonistic ascension of his kins: Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huitznahua and, ultimately, to his birth on the top of Mount Coatepetl.

Now, if the Great Temple is a stone made expression of these mythical tribulations, the verbal text which refers to them must also be considered as a temple, a temple made of words: verbal pieces made of sounds, disposed to form phrases, rhythmical sentences with a semantic referential content, subtle connotations and metaphors that produce a sense.

The construction of a text has been compared by Sahagún's informants, to the construction of a wall:

*In ma iuh tepantli oalmochiuhtia tlatolli,<sup>9</sup> achchi, achchitoton oalmotlalitia, oalmozalotia, cequi vel omozazalo otzotzop, otzotzonma, yn itlamian vel omotlamamacac, omotlaaquili, omotlatlaqualli, omoteiolloti, omotetzicuealloti, tetzicuealtica, teiollotica, ynic vel oalzotzicuealloti tlatlatoltica, auh cequi zan omococoton, omococototz, concotonqui, cocotontica, cocotocatica, cocoiontica xixipuchauhtica, xixipuchauhtoc, amo centlachixtoc, xixiquipiltic, xixiquipiliuhtoc, cocomotztic, cocomotzauhtoc.<sup>10</sup>*

Like a wall is the account constructed. Little, a little at a time, was it laid on and joined. In part it was well joined, constructed, and leveled off. When finished it was ordered, completed, and made good in all parts. It was given a core of rock, and filled with small stones; with small stones [set it] a core of rock, and chinked with clay. [So] with the separate words. But in part they were only broken, reduced to fragments, in pieces, dismembered, with holes; with unevennesses and breaks; no regarded as complete; with interruptions; bruised, altered, and changed.<sup>11</sup>

The temple is going to be sketched with words, as the account is being built as a wall.

### The mythological structure of the text

The narrative account of Huitzilopochtli's birth is rather extensive. We will only consider the very core of the story, the part which refers to the ascension of the mountain by Coyolxauhqui (the moon to be) and the Centzon Huitznahua, 'the four hundred southerners' (the stars).

In order to kill their mother, who had conceived by putting at her waist a ball of feathers which had descended upon her from heaven, Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huitznahua undertook the ascension to the top of Mount Coatepetl.

9 'The account [or the speech] is to be built as a wall'.

10 Sahagún 1979, book iv, chapter 39.

11 Translation: Sahagún 1970-1981, book iv: 132.

### The text

*Niman ie ic vi, tetcantihui, tlatlamantitihui, tlaieiecotihui, momamantihui, teiacana in Coyolxauhqui.*

*Auh in Quahuil icac, niman ie ic motlalotitleco, in quinonotzaz in Huitzilopochtli. Quilhui ca ie huitze.*

*Niman quito in Huitzilopochtli, huel xontlachie ¿can ie huitze?*

*niman ie ic conilhui in Quahuil icac: ca ie tzompantitlan,*

*ie no ceppa quioalilhui in Huitzilopochtli, ¿can ie huitze?*

*niman conilhui ca ie coaxalpan huitze,*

*ie no ceppa quioalilhui in Huitzilopochtli in Quahuil icac: tla xontlachie ¿can ie huitze? niman ic conilhui ca ie apetlac,*

*ie no ceppa quioalilhui, ¿can ie huitze?*

*niman conilhui in Quahuil icac: ca ie tlatlacapan iatihuitze.*

*Auh in Huitzilopochtli: ie no ceppa quioalilhui, in Quahuil icac, quilhui tla xontlachia ¿can ie huitze?*

*niman ic conilhui in Quahuil icac, ca iequene oalpanhuetzi, iequene oalaci teiacantihuitz in Coyolxauhqui.*

*Auh in Huitzilopochtli: niman ic oallacat.<sup>12</sup>*

Then they go. They all go in order. They go in rows. They go wielding [their weapons]. They advance crouching. Coyolxauhqui leads them.

And Quahuil icac then ran up to warn Huitzilopochtli. He said to him: "There they come".

Then Huitzilopochtli said: "Watch carefully, where do they come?"

Then Quahuil icac tells him: "Now they are at Tzompantitlan".

Again Huitzilopochtli tells him: "Where do they come?"

Then he said to him: "They arrived at Coaxalpan".

Once more Huitzilopochtli told Quahuil icac: "Please, look where do they come?"

Then he told him: "Now they are at Apetlac".

Once again [Huitzilopochtli] told him: "Where do they come?"

Then Quahuil icac told him: "Now they are coming along the slope".

And Huitzilopochtli again told Quahuil icac, he said to him: "Watch carefully, where do they come?"

Then Quahuil icac told him: "Now they are bursting forth; now they arrived here. Coyolxauhqui leads them".

And Huitzilopochtli then was born.<sup>13</sup>

### A mythological reading of the text

Coatlicue was sweeping, performing penance of the top of Mount Coatepetl. She was 'taking care of the sweeping' (*quimocuitlahuiaya in tlachpanalli*).

The sweeping could be a metaphor of the wind that sweeps the land before the rainy season, transports the pollen and enables the fecundation of the plants, specifically maize. In a domestic context, it probably alludes to the woman awaiting pregnancy, or

<sup>12</sup> Sahagún 1979, book III, chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> Translation: Patrick Johansson.

being pregnant, who takes care of the sweeping among other domestic tasks: *Ma oc itlan xonaquj in ochpanoaztli*<sup>14</sup> ‘Now get into the sweeping’.<sup>15</sup>

As Coatlicue was sweeping, a ball of feathers descended upon her. She picked it up, put it on her bosom (*ixillan contlali*) and got pregnant (*otztic in Coatlicue*).

Coatlicue (the earth) was fecundated by an anonymous celestial agent. In anecdotic terms Coatlicue was on the top of Mount Coatepetl. Actually she was the Coatepetl, she was the mountain, she was the earth.

Humiliated by the fact their mother was pregnant and no one would appear to be the father of what was in her womb, the Huiznahua and Coyolxauhqui got angry and decided to kill their mother and the baby to be born.

From within, Huitzilopochtli comforted his mother and told her not to be afraid.

Coyolxauhqui and the Huiznahua decided to ascend to the top of the mountain to kill their mother and the unborn baby.

According to the Nahuatl cultural context, pregnancy was a combat against tenebrous antagonistic forces that opposed the birth of a child. The pregnant woman (*otztic*) was considered as a warrior (*yaocihuatl*). If she conceived, she was victorious, and had a prisoner: her child. The *titicih*, the midwives would shout victory cries.

If she died during her pregnancy or in childbirth, she was considered a warrior who had died in battle. She became a *mocihuaquetzqui*, and would go to the involutive part of *Tonatiuh ichan* ‘the house of the sun’, taking the sun from the zenith to *Cihuatlampa*, the west, the place where the sun sets.

Coatlicue won the battle thanks to her son Huitzilopochtli and to one of the Huiznahua: Quahuatl icac who informed Huitzilopochtli about the progression of his enemies.

When Coyolxauhqui and her brothers the Centzon Huiznahua arrived at the top of the mountain, Huitzilopochtli was born (*hualpanhuetzi*).

Huitzilopochtli pierced his elder sister, Coyolxauhqui, decapitated her, put her head at the edge of the mountain and let her body (*itlac* ‘her trunk’) fall below; he scattered the Centzon Huiznahua, and pursued them down below and around the mountain.

### The phrastic architecture of the temple in the text

Coyolxauhqui and the Huiznahua prepare for the ascension:

*Niman ie ic vi, tetcantihui, tlatlamantitihui, tlaieiecotihui, momamantihui, teiacana in Coyolxauhqui.*

Then they go. They all go in order. They go in rows. They go wielding (their weapons). They advance crouching. Coyolxauhqui leads them.

<sup>14</sup> Sahagún 1979, book VI, chapter 25.

<sup>15</sup> I. e. ‘Take very much care of the sweeping’.

Besides the vivid description they provide, the four verbs used, *tetecpantihui*, *tlatlamantihui*, *tlayeyecotihui* and *momamantihui* with the duplication of the syllables *tetec-*, *tlatla-*, *yeye-* and *maman-*, form a four sided figure: a verbal square (*nacace* in Nahuatl) which could visually express to the four cardinal regions, allude to the squared basement of a pyramid, and perhaps to the squared constellation known as *tianquiztli* 'the market place' (Figure 6). *Tianquiztli* is also the name of a constellation evoked in a ritual of the month Ochpaniztli corresponding to the myth.<sup>16</sup> *Tianquizpan* 'the market place banner' which the goddess Toci wears as a paper crown, actually represents the Pegasus constellation that appears with the Pleiades (*miec*) and the fire drill (Gemini) (*mamalhuaztli*), at midnight, in the middle of the sky (*nepantla*) in a ceremony linked to Huitzilopochtli's birth, and referred to in the Códices Matritenses de la Real Biblioteca de Madrid.<sup>17</sup> The three constellations: *tianquiztli*, *miec*, and *mamalhuaztli*, their apparitions in the middle of the sky (*nepantla*), their descent (*mopiloto*) and the fleeing of the stars (*hualcholoa*) at dawn (*tlatlalchipahua*), are probably related to the myth here considered.

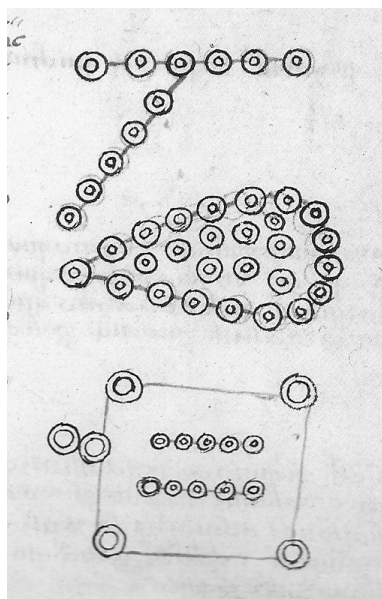


Figure 6. The constellations *tianquiztli*, *miec* and *mamalhuaztli* (Códices Matritenses 1558-1585: fol. 282r. © Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid).

16 Sahagún 1970-1981: 121; Sahagún 1979, book II, chapter 30.

17 Códices Matritenses 1558-1585: fol. 282r.

It is also important to point out that *tetecpantihui* which suggests the Huitznahua warriors were moving forward ‘in order’, might also indicate they were organized in groups of twenty. *Tecpantli* in nahuatl, refers that quantity of items and is an equivalent of *tempohualli* ‘one count’. *Tetecpantihui* would mean ‘they go by groups of twenty’ as well as ‘they go in rows’. In the vigesimal context of Aztec arithmetics, the ‘four hundred southerners’ were actually twenty groups of twenty warriors. The verb *tlatlamantihui* also entrails a similar dilogical feature. It indicates that the Centzon Huitznahua were advancing ‘in rows’ but it also means each group was a whole (*tlamantli*) in terms not precised in the narration. This squared formation of stars was led by the moon to be: Coyolxauhqui.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Quahuitl icac*

While the four hundred warriors led by Coyolxauhqui were preparing for the ascension of Mount Coatepetl, a Huitznahua named Quahuitl icac, literally ‘the tree that stands’ [erected], who actually ‘stands on both sides’, or ‘who delivers information to both sides’<sup>19</sup> (*necoc quitlalitinencia itlatol*) ran up to inform Huitzilopochtli about what was going on:

*Auh in Quahuitl icac, niman ie ic motlalotitleco, in quinonotzaz in Huitzilopochtli quilhui: ca ie huitze.*

And Quahuitl icac then ran up to warn Huitzilopochtli. He said to him: “Here they come”.

Quahuitl icac is Huitzilopochtli’s helper (*itepalehuicauh*), his elder brother (*itiacauh*). During the ceremonial running of Panquetzaliztli he is dressed like the god Paynal, with stripes of chalk on his body (*moticahuahuan*) and holds in his arms the image of the god he was given in Nonoalco.

Quahuitl icac is the *axis* around which the narration will be articulated and the Great Temple verbally constructed. A canonical scheme question/answer will thus shape the temple.

#### *The verbal shaping of the temple*

1.

Question:

*Niman quito in Huitzilopochtli, huel xontlachie can ie huitze?*

Then Huitzilopochtli said: “Watch carefully, where do they come?”

<sup>18</sup> Coyolxauhqui is not the moon yet. She will become it after being beheaded by Huitzilopochtli. Her head will actually be the selenic luminary, and her dismembered body the land for agriculture.

<sup>19</sup> Sahagún 1970-1981, book III: 2.



Answer:

*Niman ie ic conilhuia in Quahuatl icac: ca ie Tzompantitlan,*

Then Quahuatl icac tells him: “Now they are at *Tzompantitlan*”.

It is rather difficult to situate *Tzompantitlan* in the context of the ascension here referred. In the ceremonial center of Mexico-Tenochtitlan it was the place where there was the *tzompantli* ‘skull rack’, on the ground yard, at the foot of the Great Temple.

It was also the place where the image made of wood of the *pochtecas* who had died in an expedition far from home was buried.

According to Olmos (Siméon 1977: 733), it was where warriors were given the devices corresponding to their rank. The expression *niquetza itzompanco* ‘I raise someone in his *tzompantli*’ could allude to this.

In the ritual context of the month Ochpaniztli, closely related to Huitzilopochtli’s birth, it was the place where the high priest wearing Toci’s flayed skin and representing the goddess, tramped upon her drum (*conicça in ihuehueuh*).<sup>20</sup>

The *tzompancuahuatl* or *tzompantli* is also the name of a tree (*Erythrina coralloides*), called *colorín* in Spanish.

In a pictorial context, the image of the *tzompantli*, related to the god of dawn Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli could be significant to identify this first stage in the climbing of Mount Coatepetl and the corresponding level of the Great Temple.

*Tzompantitlan* could have been nothing else but the ground, the earth, *Tepetl itzintla*, the fundament of the hill, the place where the *tzompantli*, the ‘skull rack’ stood, which emerged from within the earth (Figure 7).

*Tzompantitlan* is the first stage of the ascension and probably the ground level of the *Templo Mayor*.

*tzompantitlan*

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20 Sahagún 1970-1981: 23; Sahagún 1979, book II, chapter 30.

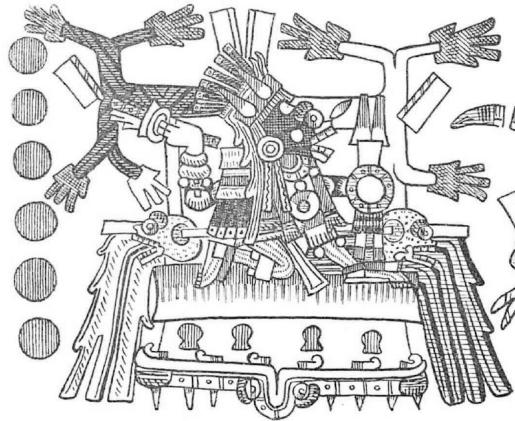


Figure 7. Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli the god of dawn and the *tzompantli*, the skull rack (Codex Borgia. Seler 1904: Pl. 19).

2.

Question:

*Ie no ceppa quioalilhuia in Huitzilopochtli: can ie huitze?*

Again Huitzilopochtli tells him: “Where do they come?”

Answer:

*Niman conilhui ca ie coaxalpan huitze,*

Then he [Quauitl icac] told him: “Now they are at Coaxalpan”.

*Coaxalpan* is quoted by Sahagún’s informants. It is the first landing of the temple. Referring the action of a high priest in the month Ochpaniztli, an informant said:

*Auh in ie iuhqui, in oxzinachpixoa nima ie ic vi in motlatizque. Niman ie ic oaltemo in tizatli yhuan ihuitl, quauhxicaltica mani, in ipac Huitzilopochtli. Auh in quioaltemohuia tizatli, tlenamacac. In oc axitico tlatzintlan, mec quimana in uncan Coaxalpan*<sup>21</sup>

And when this was done, when they had scattered the seed, thereupon they went to hide themselves away. Thereupon came down the [white] chalk and [white] feathers; they lay in a wooden vessel above [in the temple of] Uizilopochtli. And he who brought down the chalk was the fire priest. When he had come reaching the bottom, then he placed it there at *Coaxalpan*.<sup>22</sup>

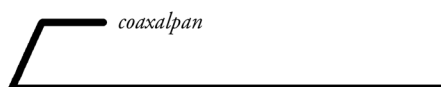
<sup>21</sup> Sahagún 1979, book II, chapter 30: 125.

<sup>22</sup> Sahagún 1970-1981, book II: 125. The English version translates *coaxalpan* as ‘on the landing’ avoiding the specific name of this landing.

The translation of the Spanish version of Sahagún is as follows:

Then, a priest descended from the top of the *cu* [temple] of Huitzilopochtli [...] he put it [a small wooden box full of chalk] in a place called *Coaxalpan*. Which was a space between the stairs of the *cu* and the lower yard, to which space one ascended by four or five steps, or six.<sup>23</sup>

*Coaxalpan* is the second level of *Templo Mayor*.



3.

Question:

*Ie no ceppa quioalilhui in Huitzilopochtli in Quahuil icac: tla xontlachie: can ie huitze?*

Once more Huitzilopochtli told Quauil icac: "Please look, where do they come?"

Answer:

*Niman ic conilhui ca ie apetlac,*

Then he told him: "Now (they are) at Apetlac".

*Apetlac* is often quoted in Sahagún's *Historia*, in Nahuatl and Spanish versions. Describing a sequence of the rituals of the month Panquetzalitzli, corresponding precisely to Huitzilopochtli's birth, an informant said:

*Auh in oquizato painalton. Niman ie ic temanalo, tetcpanalo in ispan Huitzilopochtli, in oncan apetlac, nappa in quinteucallaiaolochtiaia. Auh in ontlaiiaoloque. Ie no ceppa quintecpana, ceceiaca quinmana. Niman ie ic tleco in painalton, in iicpac Huitzilopochtli.*<sup>24</sup>

And when Painalton emerged, then [the bathed slaves] were placed in order, in rows, before Huitzilopochtli; there at Apetlac four times did they take them in procession around the temple. And when they had been taken around it, once again they put them in file; they placed them one by one in order. Then Painalton ascends to the top [of the temple of] Huitzilopochtli.<sup>25</sup>

*In otemoco tlatzintla in oncan itlaquaia Huitzilopochtli, quisnamictimoquetza in tonatiuh. Niman ie ic coniaa in iscopa, nauhcampaisti iuh quichioa.*<sup>26</sup>

When he had come down [to the pyramid base], where the banquet table of Huitzilopochtli was, he stood facing the sun. Then he gestured toward it; to all four directions he did this.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Sahagún 1989: 135 (44).

<sup>24</sup> Sahagún 1979, book ix, chapter 14.

<sup>25</sup> Translation Patrick Johansson.

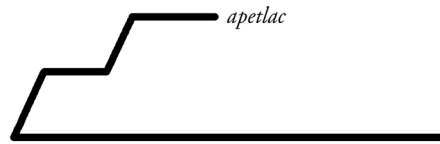
<sup>26</sup> Sahagún 1979, book ix, chapter 14.

<sup>27</sup> Sahagún 1979, book ix, chapter 14.

Sahagún's version:

When they went up by the stairs of the *cu* [temple], they took ahead of them all four prisoners, hands and feet tied whom they had tied in the landing of the *cu* called *apetlac*, which is where the stairs begin.<sup>28</sup>

*Apetlac* is the second landing of the temple.



4.

Question:

*Ie no ceppa quioalilhui: can ie huitze?*

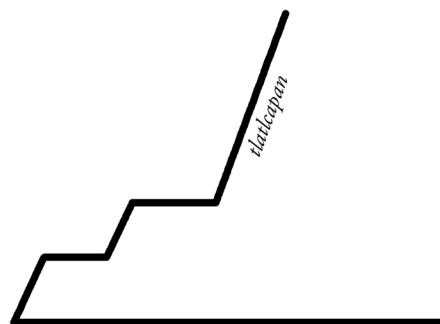
Once again [Huitzilopochtli] told him: "Where do they come?"

Answer:

*Niman conilhui in Quahuitl icac: ca ie Tlatlacapan iatihuitze,*

Then Quauitl icac told him: "Now they are coming along the slope".

*Tlatlacapan* is the intensive form of *tlacapan* 'the slope'. The duplication of the radical *tla* in the substantive term, suggests the steep aspect of the slope and the verbal dynamism of the ascension. The sources don't mention any part of the Great Temple with this name, but it is most probable that it corresponds to the very abrupt stairway that led to the top of the pyramid, from the *apetlac* landing.



<sup>28</sup> Sahagún 1989: 141-142 (29).

5.

Question:

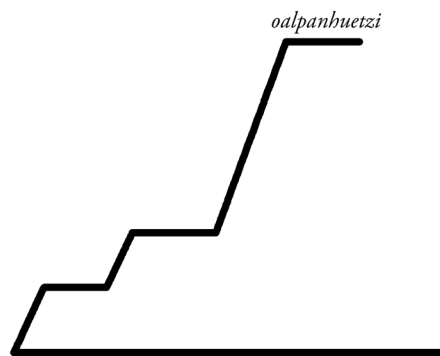
*Auh in Huitzilopochtli: ie no ceppa quioalilhui, in Quahuil icac. Quilhui tla xontlachia: can ie huitze?*

And Huitzilopochtli once more told Quahuil icac; he told him: "Watch carefully where do they come?"

Answer:

*Niman ic conilhui in Quahuil icac, ca iequene oalpanhuetzi, iequene teiacatihuiz in Coyolxauhqui.*

Then Quahuil icac told him: "Now they are bursting forth; now they are arriving here. Coyolxauhqui leads them".



After climbing the steep slope (*tlatlacapan*) that led to the top Coatepetl, Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huiznahua 'emerged' on the top of the mount. The nahuatl term *hualpanhuetzi* 'to emerge' is the word which is used when the baby is coming out of his (or her) mother's womb, in childbirth.

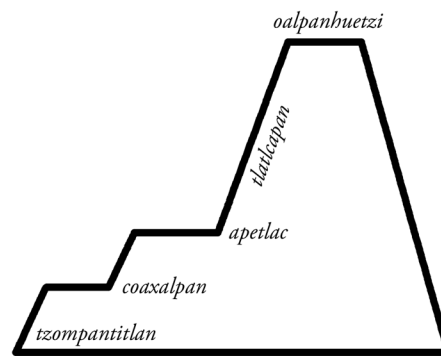
In that precise moment, Huitzilopochtli was born (*auh in Huitzilopochtli niman ic oallacat*). Then someone called Tochancalqui to set fire to the *xiuhcoatl* ('the turquoise serpent) that Huitzilopochtli was holding. Huitzilopochtli pierced his elder sister (*quixil in Coyolxauhqui*), cut her head (*quetchcotontihuetz in itzontecan*), put it at the edge of Coatepetl (*on mocauih in itempa Coatepetl*), and let her body fall below, all along the stairs (*auh in itlac tlatzintlan huetzico*).

The ascension of Coatepetl by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huiznahua defined the different levels of the Great Temple as well as the different stages in Coatlicue's pregnancy. The place where Huitzilopochtli 'emerged' (*hualpanhuetzi*) is in fact *Tlacazouhcan*, literally 'the place where people are bored' or 'where people are extended

(on the sacrificial stone) with open arms'. As a matter of fact, *zohua* (*çoua*) in nahuatl means 'to open', 'to extend', 'to bore'. *Çohuatl* is also a variant of *cihuatl* 'woman'. The metaphorical expression *tepan nicçoa in cueitl, in huipilli* 'I give a wife to someone'<sup>29</sup> could weave an intricate tissue of mythological threads.

*Auh Huitzilopochtli: niman ic oallacat.*

And Huitzilopochtli then was born.



The head of Coyolxauhqui would be the moon, standing at the edge of Coatepetl, and in the urban context of the Great Temple, on the top, near Huitzilopochtli. The dismembered parts of her body, might represent the earth to be cultivated and would be associated each one with a cardinal region.

As for the Centzon Huitznahua, they were scattered from the top of Coatepetl and pursued around the mountain. Four times did he chase them around the mountain, and those who could escape fled toward the South.

The Great Temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan is the ceremonial urban version of Mount Coatepetl, of what happened there in *illo tempore* and was periodically re-enacted in the space-time of the corresponding rituals. The myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth on Coatepetl was the fundament of the temple, but beyond the action verbally referred, the narrative structure of the text contributed to shape a temple made of words. It is probable that the temple verbally sketched had preceded the pyramid, and that the stages in the ascension of Mount Coatepetl by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huitznahua had defined what was going to be its 'archi-tectonic' features before it was built in stone. Whatever might have been the case, the image of the Great Temple was stamped in the verbal account and printed in the Mexicas' minds and hearts.

<sup>29</sup> Olmos, quoted by Siméon (1977: 114).



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